

[Ms. Cora Lovell]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in New England

(Massachusetts)

TITLE Cora Lovell - Jack of All Trades

WRITER Rosalie Smith

DATE 1/4/39 WDS. PP. 16

CHECKER DATE

SOURCES GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

Berkshire Borner 1/9/39 W. Mass 1938-9

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER ROSALIE SMITH

ADDRESS PERU, MASSACHUSETTS

DATE JANUARY 4, 1939

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MRS CORA LOVELL

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ADDRESS HINSDALE, MASSACHUSETTS

The following interview took place in Mrs Cora Lovell's neat cottage in Hinsdale Center. Mrs Lovell's duties as Town Celrk, Justice of the Peace, newspaper reporter town Librarian combined with her hobbies — cooking, golfing, fancy work and visiting, keep this sixty-seven year old lady busy. It is never easy to get a chance to talk with her — she's on the move all day. [We?] were fortunate in catching her at home and undisturbed by official cares.

Mrs Lovell's house is as neat and tidy as the proverbial pin. There is a comfortable combination of old-fashioned furniture and modern decorations that give the rooms charm. and a certain distinction. But the neat rooms are only a setting for as dynamic and “peppy” elderly lady as is to be found anywhere.

In every small moribund town there are a few outstanding individuals who, it seems, would never become victims of depressions and decadence. Like strong, hardy plants that grow in rocky, barren soil, these people manage to prosper in towns that offer few opportunities. Such a person is Mrs. Cora Lovell of Hinsdale, town clerk, justice of the peace, marrying justice, librarian, news reporter, society woman (she mingles with wealthy summer residents and the four hundred of Hinsdale), ardent golfer (a charter member of the Hinsdale Country Club), excellent card player and member of the American Missionary Society.

About twenty-five years ago, after her husband's death, Mrs. Lovell, New York born and a former school teacher, found herself thrown on her own resources. She ran a boarding house, she “took in” sewing, she substituted as school teacher “It was rather difficult at first,” she said, “teaching all eight grades. I wasn't trained for it. I had only one grade in New York.” She sat on delinquent taxpayer's doorsteps on pay night to collect meagre sums, and made the startling record of collecting every penny of town taxes during her two years of office; she climbed the lonely slopes of Warner Mountain at two o'clock in the

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morning in hopes of getting a newspaper scoop and in 1920 she took the Hinsdale census on foot. She is the feminine analogy of the small town "Jack-of-all-trades".

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Mrs. Lovell is sixty-seven years old. Last year she went to Europe. "I climbed Gibraltar without any trouble," she said, "Do you know why? The Hinsdale Golf Course. Gibraltar would never faze anyone who had played on the Hinsdale course."

Mrs. Lovell was born on Staten Island, New York but when she was eight years old her family moved to New York city. She was graduated from Hunter College, then taught school until she was twenty-seven years old, when she married. She and her husband traveled widely in the United States, both were disciples of Isaac Walton. "I've kept house in Florida, California, Maine, New York and Massachusetts," she said, "and I've fished in the Pacific Ocean, the St. John River, and the Rangely Lakes in Maine."

After her husband's health failed they moved to Hinsdale, where they bought a farm. Mrs. Lovell became a farmerette, making butter and helping with the heavy outdoor work. "My husband had a theory that if we raised all of our grain instead of buying it, we would be able to make money," she said, "of course, we had to have help in some of the busy seasons, but we both almost worked ourselves to death. I didn't mind it, because I was young and strong and I liked farm work, but my husband wasn't very well.

"We had horses for the first time in our lives, and we enjoyed them so much. We had bicycles that we brought with us from New York, but it wasn't much fun riding them on these bumpy roads.

"We stayed on the big farm for about two years and then we came to the conclusion that we had bitten off more than we could chew, so we bought a smaller one, but we had to sell that after a while. Then, because of my husband's health, we spent five or six winters in the South, but kept a house in Hinsdale for the summer," continued Mrs. Lovell.

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Although Mrs. Lovell lives alone she doesn't resort to the slack housekeeping methods, characteristic of many country one-person-homes. Her house is always neat, and she frequently mentions trying out new recipes, merely for her own gustatory satisfaction.

She is a firm believer in accuracy — her news can usually be relied upon; and she keeps well posted on the bundles and bundles of State laws, relating to the town clerkship. Slackness on the part of other town officials irritates her extremely.

Despite her sixty-seven years, Mrs. Lovell never gives one the impression of being an “elderly” or an “old lady”; she is seldom referred to as such. Her energy, her ambition, her vitality, her activities, and her plump look of health belie her age. She has a hearty, vigorous personality that reflects courage, and aplomb. An indefatigable conversationalist, she can talk rapidly and constantly for hours. You notice a slight New York accent in such words as firm (foim), heard (hoid), et cetera. When the vulgar might swear she exclaims “Mercy me” (“Moicey me”); and when she becomes excited she frequently addresses her listeners with a “My dear.” You can't fully appreciate her stories second hand; you have to talk with her yourself — listen 4 to her forceful emphasis on certain words — watch her inimitable facial expressions — and if you've never actually seen a person “double up with laughter” you should see Mes. Lovell, with hearty girlish laughter, or a loud guffaw, throw her hands up over her face, wrinkle up her nose, bend forward, raise her feet slightly in the air, and rock back and forth.

Mrs. Lovell was the first woman town clerk in Massachusetts, she was one of the first women tax collectors (served in 1922 and 1923) and she is one of the few women marrying justices in the state. It might be inferred from these and her various other occupations that she is a typical career woman or another Susan B. Anthony, trying to establish women's rights, but apparently not, for she said, “I didn't look for any of the work. It all came to me. Some of it was just forced upon me. I was perfectly content to let the men take care of the town affairs. After my husband died I was sewing for other people, substituting in the schools, taking in boarders and doing just about anything I could to

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make a living, you know. Augustus Frissell (Hinsdale merchant) was town clerk at that time; and he said it was dreadfully hard for him to take care of the work. Sometimes he would have five or six customers waiting in his store, and someone would come in and ask for a fishing license, or a hunting license, or a marriage license, or want something looked up in the town records. So he asked me if I would take it over. I told him I didn't know a thing about the town clerk's work, but he said, 'You can learn.

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Just hang around me at town meetings, I'll show you all I can.'

"Well, my sakes at the next town meeting both the Democrats and Republicans nominated me for town clerk. I was elected and became the first woman town clerk in Massachusetts. That was in 1921 and I've been elected every year since. Only once did I have any opposition - Mercy, I don't blame my opponents at all for trying to beat me that year.."

The story of the opposition is one of those small town political "inside tales" which seldom appear in print. A Democrat had been elected to the school committee but he was called to another town before the expiration of his term. The Republicans who were in the majority that year, appointed a Republican to fill the vacancy. "It wasn't a fair thing to do," says Mrs. Lovell, "it was outrageous. A Democrat had been elected and a Democrat should have been appointed to fill the vacancy. I don't blame them for being mad. Of course, I didn't have anything to do with the appointment, but the Democrats vowed they would put every Republican out of office at the next election. The woman who opposed me was very well liked; and I thought I didn't have a chance. I even collected my books and papers together and tied some of them up with string; but when the votes were counted I won by a large majority. That was the first and only time I have ever had any opposition.

"I didn't ask for the job as librarian either," continues Mrs. Lovell, who by now was getting warmed up, "One night the 6 librarian who had been here for years and years, went crazy. He tore his hair and tore the skin off his face something awful, and went screaming

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through the streets. The end of it was he had to be taken to the Northampton Insane Asylum. They didn't know what to do for a librarian. Some of the trustees came and asked me if I would take the job. I told them I didn't know a thing about a library, although I did know quite a little about books. They said they needed someone right away and asked me if I wouldn't try it for a while. Well I said I'd come in for a while to help out - and I've been librarian ever since. That was in 1917.”

Mrs. Lovell recalls her experiences as the first woman town clerk of Massachusetts, not as a series of multifarious, uninteresting duties, but rather as a new experience, from which she derived as much pleasure and amusement, as she did hard work. “After I was first elected,” she says with a wide grin, “almost every letter I received was addressed 'dear Sir'. I didn't think so much of this because I knew I was the only woman clerk, but one day I received a letter from a certain firm, asking me to suggest the names of men in the town who might make good salesmen for their products. ‘If you will do this for us’, the letter read, ‘we will give you your choice of a safety razor or a sweet briar pipe’.” Mrs. Lovell “doubles up with laughter” her feet flung up, her shoulders down until you might think she was about to take a somersault.

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“I remember one time Judge Warner came out to my house to look up something in the town record books. I don't remember now just what he was looking for, but it was something way back in 1850 or 1860. He was terribly pleased that he found it and he said, 'mrs. Lovell you have kept these records beautifully.' The record had been recorded long before I was born but I didn't say anything.”

I asked Mrs. Lovell how she happened to become a marrying justice. “Well, after I was elected town clerk,” she said, “I thought it would be a good thing to have a justice of the peace in the town, because there were so many papers to be sworn to, you know; and we always had to go out of town for it. I suggested that one of the town officers become a justice of the peace; and some of them thought I should be the one, so in 1922 I became

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a justice of peace. The combination of town clerk and J. P. gives you the power of a marrying justice you know. I've been told that years ago there were a good many of them in Berkshire County, but for some reason or another there's only two left. It keeps us kind of busy. During 1938 I performed twenty marriage ceremonies.

“The first time I was ever asked to marry anyone, was a few years ago. You remember old Mr. Micheals, who lived in the South part of Hinsdale, don't you? Well, he inserted an advertisement for a housekeeper in some newspaper, and a girl from New York answered. She was a German girl — handsome and very well dressed, but you only had to look at her once to know what kind of a girl she was. After she had been there about two weeks she and Mr. Michaels came to me and said 8 they wanted to get married. He was Catholic and really preferred to be married in the Catholic Church, but the girl insisted upon having a civil marriage. She said that in Germany a civil marriage was the most binding. At last they decided to be married by me on Sunday afternoon and at the Catholic Church Monday morning. I tried to convince her that a church marriage was the very best thing we had in this country; and I told her that if they were married by me I would have to take the license and they wouldn't have any license to give to the priest. But she insisted on having me marry them. Sunday afternoon Bill Dornety came over with his camera and hid behind the door. He wanted to get a picture of me performing my first marriage ceremony. Just as the couple got here the priest called up and asked me if they were going to be married here. I told him ‘Yes’ and I told him that I had tried to convince the girl that the church was the best place in this country to be married. I talked and I talked and I talked to the girl and finally I persuaded her to wait and be married in the church the next morning - so I was cheated out of the first ceremony I expected to perform. She turned out to be Just the kind of a girl everyone thought she was. After the wedding she took his gun and wouldn't let him near her. He had quite a little money, and somehow she got hold of that and went to Germany on her honeymoon - along alone . Can you imagine ?

“Well, that wasn't the end of her and her old chump. About a year after their marriage the telephone operator called me one day and told me I'd better hustle right over to their farm.

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There'd been 9 telephone calls for help, doctors, the state police etc. Mr. Michaels had hung himself in the barn. The constable and I searched the house from top to toe, trying to find her. Later they found she'd gone off to the city.

“The first time I ever did perform a marriage ceremony, the telephone rang, and a man's voice said, ‘Can you marry people?’ ‘Have you the proper license?’ I asked. ‘We got our license in Pittsfield’, the voice said. I was all excited. I straightened up the house and hunted around until I found a prayer book, with a marriage service in it. I crossed out the prayers, because I thought mebbe if they wanted to be married later I heard a car drive in the yard and I went to the window. Glory Be - they were blacker than ink. Five black ones. The bride was one of the blackest negroes I ever saw and she had on a white chiffon hat. The best man said, ‘don't you know me, Mrs. Lovell? I used to live in Hinsdale?’ I found out later that he was one of the L— boys. So the first couple I ever married were negroes, blacker than coal.

“Last summer I was asleep on the sun porch for some cousins of mine were sleeping in my bedroom, when I heard the awfulest pounding on the door. It was about twelve o'clock at night, and I thought it must be some drunks. They pounded as if they were perfectly mad. Then a woman called ‘Mrs. Lovell’. By that time my cousins woke up and one of them came downstairs and said, ‘Cora, don't you hear that pounding?’ ‘I'd be dead if I didn't’, I said. The people outside heard us talking 10 so I had to go speak to them. I was pretty cross to be awakened at that time of night, and I said, ‘What do you people want?’. ‘We're from up on top of Washington Mountain,’ the voice said, ‘We've been living together ever since my husband died, but some of the folks over there doesn't seem to like it. They made a lotta fuss about it, and we had to go out to court in Pittsfield today and they told us out there that we had to get married right away. We thought we'd celebrate a little so we had supper after we got through at that court, and then we went to a movie, but we thought maybe we'd better come and get married right away, because they told us to and we're afraid the people in Washington won't like it if we don't.’ They were negroes, too. The prospective groom had been the best man at the first wedding I performed. I told them

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they would have to go back to Washington and get a license and then wait five days. They didn't want to. They kept saying that the man at court told them to get married at once but I finally got rid of them. The next Thursday night they came here to be married, but I wasn't home, so they went to a minister. Can't say I was sorry.

"I've never seen, such queer people as some of those who come to get married. Another time I heard someone rapping on the door. I went out and there stood a tiny crippled man with two crutches. He told me that he wanted to get married, and pointed to the car, where his bride sat. He spoke to her and she got out of the car. She was an enormous woman, absolutely enormous. Some of the other men in the party were crippled too, but the groom couldn't get up the steps alone.

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The bride and another man hoisted him up and when they left they had to lift him down. When they were leaving one of the crippled men said to me, 'We're relics of the war'. The groom had given his age as thirty-three, so I wondered what war they could mean. I stood there in the doorway and said, 'War, war, what war?'. He winked and said, 'the Civil War'.

"Then there was a high school teacher and a girl who said she was a craftsman whatever that may be, from one of the Jewish summer camps on the lake, who asked me if they could come here and get married at ten o'clock at night. I guess they brought the whole camp with them. I never saw such a gang. I guess they'd been celebrating before they got here for most of them were — well, I guess you'd say, lit up. There wasn't a chair left in the living room - some of them sat two on one chair. I didn't know what my furniture would look like when they got through. I asked the couple who were getting married if they would please stand, but the girl said, 'I'm not going to stand. I've been working all day and I'm tired and I'm not going to stand.' Then the groom said, 'Well, if you're not going to stand then I'm not either.' That was the only sit down wedding I ever had. They both sat there smoking cigarettes while I read the ceremony.

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“Sometimes,” continued Mrs. Lovell, settling back in her roomy chair, “people come to get married and don't bring any witnesses, but I can usually get some of the neighbors to oblige. A short time ago this 12 happened, so I called up Mr. and Mrs. Brown and they came over. While I was reading the ceremony the bride kept wiggling and squirming and jumping around. I couldn't make out what on earth was the matter with the girl. I thought perhaps she had Saint Vitus dance or something. I gave them their certificate, and after they went Mr. Brown said to me, 'do you know what was the matter with the bride? The groom was pinching her all the time they were being married.' Can you imagine!..!

“Another time a divorced woman, who was only twenty-two years old came to get married. After the ceremony, instead of waiting for her husband to kiss her, she made a dash for him, then for the two other men in the party. Moicy me, she descended on those men like a mountain of brick. I've never seen anyone go at the men the way that girl did. Good Heavens! I don't know what ails some folks.

“One night a couple from Lanesboro came to me and said they wanted to get married but they didn't have a license because the man's divorce wasn't final. I told them I was sorry but I couldn't marry them. They'd have to get a license first. ‘But why won't they let us get married?’ the woman insisted, ‘If people only understood I think they would.’ ‘I guess people understand all right,’ I said, kinda sharp, ‘but you ought to have thought of that long ago.’

“One December a couple came to get married and as they were leaving the bride said, ‘We wouldn't have known anything about you, Mrs. Lovell, only my girl friend told us about you.’ (and she mentioned the name) ‘You married them last November and you ought to see what 13 a nice little boy they have now.’ Yes, I told her I remembered her girl friend all right. I was afraid I would have to turn my house into a maternity ward.

“Land sakes, I mustn't talk on like this. You'll be thinking all my marriages are terrible. They aren't at all. I've had some real nice ones - the brides dressed up real pretty and the

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grooms nervous and all-a-flutter. Moicy. I must admit I like being town clerk. Its not near as much work as when I was Tax Collector and it's more interesting. I served as Tax Collector for two years - 1922 and 1923 - you know and what a time I had.

“Both years I collected every cent of taxes in the town. Of course, it was easier in those days than it would be now. Everyone was working, but people didn't know how to save. They spent every cent they earned. But I found out when pay day was at the mill, or wherever they worked and they I'd go to their house that day. Sometimes I went a few minutes before I thought they would be home and sat on their doorsteps, so they wouldn't have a chance to spend-all of their money before I got some of it. It may not have been lawful but I did it just the same. On the back of some tax bills I'd have several columns of figures, because often all I could get would be a dollar, or a dollar and a half. Of course, now that I've been in politics so long I would know better than I did then, but after I was first elected I thought I had to reform everyone else; and if they couldn't save, I thought I had a right to try to save for them. No collector since has ever 14 collected every cent. Of course, they don't have the time that I did. Most of them have other jobs and can just work on the tax collecting at night or in spare moments. They can't go around sitting on people's doorsteps, waiting for them to come home as I did. It was queer too, I didn't have any trouble collecting taxes from the summer residents although today the summer residents are the worst backsliders in town. I wrote nice letters to all of them, and every one responded with a check. At the end of the first year people thought I was too thorough. Guess I pested folks too much. I was opposed at the next election, but I was elected. The next year I was opposed again, and that time I was defeated by seven votes. Now almost every year both Democrats and Republicans come to me before election and ask me if I won't run for tax collector. There are thousands of dollars outstanding, but I don't want the job.

“The worst experience I ever had was when I was Tax Collector. It was right after I was elected. The assessors gave me a commitment book, but no warrant. Of course, it's illegal to collect without a warrant; and according to the laws then there was some terrible fine

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or imprisonment — I can't remember just what it was-imposed upon anyone who did collect without a warrant, so I didn't dare. I kept after those assessors and kept asking and asking them for a warrant, but they kept putting me off. They said I didn't need it, none of the other collectors had ever bothered about it. I went to the former tax collector but he told me he never bothered about a warrant, he said it 15 wouldn't do me any good to have it anyway because the assessors kept making so many mistakes they'd have to keep changing the warrant. Then the selectmen got after me. They said I'd have to start collecting, because the town needed the money badly, and people who wanted to pay their taxes began to complain that I wouldn't take their money. I didn't know what to do, so I wrote to Boston. I told them the selectmen were pressing me, but that I just couldn't get a warrant from the assessors. In a few days an investigation was started. It was held in the town hall, and I got up and told the men from Boston that our assessors didn't do a thing but draw their salary. After the meeting the investigators said they wanted to see the assessors alone. A few days later I got the warrant. That was an awful embarrassing time but I couldn't help it.”

Knowing that Mrs. Lovell had had an experience or two while acting as local reporter for the Springfield Republican I tried to shift the conversation into that channel.

“Well, most of my work for the Republican is just ordinary stuff but I did have one experience a year or so ago that was kinda exciting.

“One night about two o'clock the phone rang. Someone from the Republican in Springfield was calling and wanted to know if I had heard anything about an airplane falling on Warner Hill. I told them ‘No’ I hadn't heard anything about it, but they said they had the rumor and they would like to have me verify it if possible. (NOTE: 16 There is only one house — occupied by negroes — in the near vicinity of Warner Hill. The road beyond that house is impassable by car). I put a coat on over my nightgown and started out. I had an old Ford at that time so I drove up as far as Mrs. Washington's. (the negro family mother). I thought I would stop there and see if she had heard anything about the airplane. I pounded and

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pounded on the door, but no one answered. Finally I went around to one of the bedroom windows and roused Mrs. Washington, but she hadn't heard anything that sounded like an airplane. I left the car and walked all around the hill. I coo-hooed every few minutes, hoping that if an airplane had dropped some of the survivors might answer, but no one did. After I had searched for about an hour I went home and called the Republican. The next day I discovered that it was nothing but a motor boat on Plunkett Lake, which someone had mistaken for an airplane and me trotting all over Warner Hill in the middle of the night in my nightgown. Can you imagine.”

Mrs. Lovell was warmed up and going, strong. Her multitudinous cares were laid aside for the time being, and the afternoon was still young. Just about then as Mrs. Lovell expressed it, “Business came rapping at the door” in the form of a town official who wanted a record checked. He lingered , asking for more information so we departed, not however before Mrs. Lovell had commanded. “Come back again soon and bring your mother. Always glad to see you. Tell your mother I got a new pattern for those aprons I was telling her about.” With a smart shake of her head and hand she bustled back to her official duties.